13. The Princess-and-the-Pea Event

How did Hen get out of the house when my father forgot to leave the outer door unlocked? She'd make an exasperated sound, then fetch her …?

Fetch her magnet. That was it, a big magnet. I concentrated on remembering its shape and size and weight. A cube that filled Hen's hand, the upper face in her palm. Her fingers and thumb grappled three sides. She'd heft it and swipe a door lock with it, then put it away again in its safe place.

I'd be waiting at the door and never actually saw the place. Where would she have hidden it? I didn't flutter around searching, wasting my energy or air. I let my mind search the places where my father would never think to look. Therefore not the bathroom cabinet, my shelves or Hen's shelves. Not under my bed.

I checked the boxes by touch. Kneeling by Hen's bed, I dragged them out. The first one was for the emergency food. I felt around in it. Three packets remained. Shoved that box back. The middle box was for Hen's outdoor clothes when she was with me, her indoor clothes when she wasn't. Stroking her soft old indoor shirt, I got a lump in my throat. Sniffed and shoved that box back under the bed. *If I cry, I'll be using up more air than I can afford*.

The last box contained a spare set of fetcher-type clothes for me, in case I needed a new identity. The fetchers out in the concourse probably all knew, or knew of me, by now. Might help to be able to move around without them realising there-she-goes. I undressed and dressed, feeling all the hems and seams and pockets in the fetcher clothes twice, in case I missed any secrets.

No secrets. Best thing about my new outfit? No smell. I tossed my old clothes into the box. Not the magnet yet.

Our living room had my desk by the inner wall, that is the wall between me and the rest of the house. A small fold-up picnic table and two fold-up chairs sat by the unit's outer wall, where we ate and played games. A pretend porthole was set into the wall beside the table that I used to delight in programming with outdoor scenes with palm trees.

Back to finding the magnet. I crawled around on my hands and knees to check the undersides of things. I banged my head on the table and then the desk.

I stopped for a while after banging my head on the underside of the desk. Just lay there imagining the rooms and the furniture from my blind point of view on the floor. I started to doze off. All the excitement, I suppose. Plus being hollow in the gut. *Might as well get comfortable*. I crawled onto Hen's bed.

Lay down with my head near the door, my feet on the pillow. I doubted that Hen would be back to rile at me. Only two doors between me and freedom—and finding Du—if I left the door between Hen's room and the living room open. I would've slept except for the lump under my shoulder.

What on Earth does Hen keep in her bed? I ripped apart her carefully tucked-in sheets and

quilt. Nothing untoward there. *Untoward*. One of Hen's favourite words. That lump threatened to close my throat again. I pressed my lips back over my teeth. Whatever the lump was, it wasn't *in* the bed. I folded the mattress back onto itself.

Yes! The magnet! It sat half in the depression left by the bed-leg being extended out further because of Hen suddenly deciding one day that she wanted the bed higher.

I laughed, remembering. What did Hen tell my father for a reason that she suddenly wanted her bed hoisted up? *Lost in the mists of time*. I remembered his *embarrassment* at having to hold it up, just so, while she crawled half-under it to adjust the screw collar. *Ha ha, she bested you, my unnatural father!*

Nothing was going to stop me now. I swiped the magnet over the door lock of the door between me and the study. The door swished open. Swiping the door-stop at the top of the track, I set the door on Open. Waltzed through, feeling giddy with excitement and hunger. I swiped the door between me and freedom.

Nothing. No go. Zilch. Zero. Nought. The magnet didn't work on the exit door!

I almost threw the magnet at the green line outlining the house computer where it was set in the study's table top. Let my arm fall just in time while I gripped the magnet tight. Whenever Hen let me hold it when I was still real young, she cupped her hands under it. *Don't let it fall on the ground*.

Setting the magnet gently on the table top beside the computer, I threw myself into my father's chair. I woke the computer. Cheered, turning all the lights on, both in my hidden rooms and the legal house. Got the the aircon going. Opened the louvres. Unlocked the internal doors. "Yes, yes, yes! Tra-lah!"

Opened a charger, and rested my mobile on it.

I danced into the legal house, laughing victoriously.

It didn't look, or smell, like a house that anyone would be coming home to. No furniture, for a start. That sobered me. Breathing didn't feel so good anymore. Just the dust was left and the stale places where the heavy furniture had stood.

The litter bin in the kitchen held a half bag of bread cubes, the remains of the duck food probably. I was hungry enough that I gobbled up a handful of them and sucked water from my water-bottle. Why didn't my father leave them with Du?

Unless there'd been no ducks in the scenario. He'd been away for one-and-three-quarter-hours. There and back meant he'd abandoned her maybe fifty minutes out. Or an hour for her little legs to walk there, and half an hour for him to walk back. *Rough guess, remember*.

I had to get out there myself.

In one of the empty rooms I found a calico-look shoulder bag hanging from a door catch, with a packet of coffee shots tucked deep in a corner. I added the rest of the duck food in its

plastic bag and my water bottle. *Hey presto, my food supply*.

Back to the study. Pocketing my recharged mobile, I went back to studying my father's filing system. *Ha!* A file with the staff's codes to get in and out of the house. Hen's code was N-G-9A.

N-G-9A? Could that be her house code as well? N for North. G for Ground Level. The rest referring to a unit down there maybe. I was hazy on accommodation at ground level, even ground level was a mystery. *Thought it was all water down there?*

I couldn't wait any longer, had to know if the code could get me out of the house. I punched N-G-9A into the keypad by the exit door. *Yes! The door slid open!* I was out and could order a ride … But wait! I forgot I had no credit left on my mobile. Beg Jules and Lilah up top for a ride across?

But after that? I had to eat and Du would be hungry too by now. Back into the study. Dropped back into the system. Deeper and deeper. The-man-my-father was a lot more careful with his own codes.

There.

According to his credit records, my father had three children. Okay, he did. I read further. Each child – Daughter, Son, Daughter – had a row of figures assigned to them that were storing varying large amounts. *Oh right! As if any of us knew anything about that*. Not that Du or my brother were old enough to need money. All the amounts were larger than the amount in my father's own row. That should tell me something.

But my gut grumbled. *No time now*. *I'm too hungry*. I transferred one hundred credits from his account to my mobile. Enough so it would be easy to misread the new total of 500 as the original total of 600. Deleted everything in the names of his three children. Because he acted like he *had* no children?

14. Finding Du

The elevator buggy rattled up from wherever it made its previous stop. *Good to know that I'm not the only one using the buggies*. Even though I hadn't yet seen anyone since escaping. I glanced up to see the crane-arm and the caboose hanging under it. Jules and Lilah were up there. *Comforting*. Not totally alone in the scene.

The crane-arm stuck out from Utilities. Sunlight glinted off the cabling sliding within the latticed arm. Although the sky above the crane was pale blue, mist rose between the buildings. I leaned over the safety rail to see the chasm between them deep in shadow. No ground level to be seen.

The buggy stopped, the door slid aside and I jumped aboard. The buggy rocked and the door didn't close. *Oops*. I stepped here, there, to find the place where my weight balanced the floor and allowed the door shut.

While the buggy crossed the divide, I dug into my food bag and chewed bread cubes. Drank water.

On the other side the buggy descended and stopped. I shot out and waved upward with big swings of my arms. I couldn't stop grinning when the steam whistle hooted. At least somebody appreciated that I was alive.

Staring through the concrete doorway into the concourse with barely a plan, doubts reared their heads in me. I felt hollow. Meeting up with someone like Hen right now would've been good. And what would she have said being summoned to shore up a lack of courage? *Go at it, girl!*

Though she did also always say to look before you leap. And think your task through before you commit yourself. My task, find Du. Find the duck pond where she was abandoned. How?

The doorway was wide enough to take a fly-car, I remembered, but only high enough that I could and would—yes—with a jump touch the overhead jamb. For luck. Then I pushed slowly through the murmuring crowd, shamelessly eavesdropping on every conversation about children, and what they might right now be doing.

Nobody talked about taking kids to parks, playgrounds or duck-ponds. Too early in the day, I suppose. Most kids had just been dropped off at daycare or school.

What if all the green spaces and playgrounds had been disappeared to make way for fly-cars? As had the market gardens?

Mmm. I'd have to be smarter. But on an empty stomach? I remembered I had no smell on my clothes. I joined a queue lining up for food. Bought two roll-ups and a bottle of water. No drama. Ate and thought up my next move. Joined the queue again.

"Still hungry?" said the woman serving.

"For my sister," I said. "Her favourite is soy cheese with brown sugar."

"Spoiling her," the server said.

"A treat," I said. "She said she was at the park," I said. "But she's little. Didn't tell me which park. Just that it had a duck-pond and it was near here?"

A couple of people in the queue laughed. "Everything is near here, pet," said a woman at the end of the line. "Your parents never took you to the roof? A little one, is she by herself?"

Ignoring that woman, I paid the stall-holder for Du's roll-up and a bottle of water and started toward the ramps. If Hen ever took me to the roof in the days of the secret outings, I didn't remember it. Wonder why she didn't?

The woman from the end of the queue followed me. "You should hurry," she said. "Going-to-feed-the-ducks is a thing people do to dump their excess children. Who knows what happens to them afterwards?"

Startled into action, I mouthed a thanks at her before starting to run. My mind raced ahead. Du, if she was still at the pond, had been alone up there through the night.

A heavy weight thumped into my back. I slammed to the concrete. “Gotcha!” someone shouted and sat on my legs, flattening my knees against the concrete pavement.

“Ouch! Get off me!”

“Be quiet,” the someone hissed. “It’s a fair catch.” Out of the side of her mouth she said, “You can all relax. I’ve got her.”

It was Jackie sitting on my legs.

Complaints came out of her earpiece and she addressed them. “She passed you, dipstick. She’s obviously smarter than you are. Go home. Miz Henry squared it with the House. We can have the rest of the day off.”

“You said Miz Henry.” I struggled free from under her. “You’re talking about Hen. Where is she? Get *off* me!”

“Only if you don’t run,” Jackie said.

“You sound a lot like my brother used to,” I said. “I won’t hurt you if you don’t run, he’d say to my little sister.”

She let me get to my feet. Even dusted me off.

“You need to let me go,” I said. “If Hen doesn’t have Du yet, I need to go up to the roof. To the duck-pond.”

“Hey, you are weird. How about first asking what’s your name? It’s Jackie by the way. Miz Henry told me yours. Kosi Lionhair. Seriously weird.”

“The fetcher complaining at you through your earpiece the first time we met, called you Jackie. Her name is Gladdy.”

Jackie frowned, glanced about, then smiled. “Miz Henry set this up. A fetch to fetch a fetcher, she said. She told me what you’re like. She’s got a real sense of smart.”

“Does she have Du?” I said. “If not, let me go. She could still be up there. She could’ve hidden.” I got ready to pull free.

Jackie talked into her earpiece, inquiring about Du. “Oh. Okay.” She turned back to me. “Let’s go. We’re to meet Miz Henry and Rhoka in the freight elevator. ” She led me into the only wide corridor raying off from the concourse. “What size kid are we looking for?”

“She’s six. About this high.” I patted my elbow. “A little higher than my waist.” Then I ran. Not waiting for the elevator.

Jackie dithered. She was torn. She'd been given her instructions.

I ran up the next ramp. Zig zagged like an antelope trying to escape a lion. Luckily met no one. At the top I ran into a green space. *Surprise!* I stopped. Needed to get my bearings.

I tiptoed among a bunch of solid sapling trunks. Nothing underfoot. Like no dry leaves or sticks. Overhead a cloud of digital veg. *Wonder if they have any real, actual saplings fronting the display?*

Not here for that. Listen hard for a little voice. I skulked along the back of the display and noted four entries in the corners. The elevator made the fifth. No Du yet.

Ping. Ping. I stopped. The elevator disgorged at least four people, Hen among them. I knew her voice. Rohka, an adult female. And Jackie, and maybe the elevator attendant. They all spread into the central park-style landscape. And started calling out to Du.

What the hell? Too many strangers. Though Du might know Hen. I couldn't recall if they ever met. I slid-footed a couple of paces inward. Started sideways to get a circle happening. If Du *was* still here, I had to hope she'd be hiding and that I'd meet her within the so-called forest.

When I was about a quarter around the circle, nearly level with the second corner entrance, an elevator dinged. Not the same sound as the freight elevator. A larger bunch of people got out, I saw between the saplings. Half a dozen. Police uniforms. I felt relieved. *Police help people, right?*

But when the police advanced on Hen and her group, they seemed to think they could herd Hen and the others back the way they'd come.

Though I couldn't hear exactly what they said, Hen and Rohka argued their case for being there. The man just about shouted. I heard him fine. "Why would you not expect people to come searching for a lost little one?"

I didn't listen for what Jackie might have to add, for it came to me that Hen and the rest were being a diversion. I continued through the forest, side-stepping and freezing whenever the police faced my way.

"Du," I said softly. "Wake up." In case she was asleep. "Du. I'm your sister, Kosi Lionhair. I've come to find you, take you to a safe place. Hen is out there stopping the bad people catching us. I'm in the forest with you. Silent voice, silent feet, Du."

I sidled along another quarter circle. Hen and the others were forced toward to elevator bay. It looked like two or three of the police were ready to peel off and start the hunt.

"A clever ploy, isn't it?" Hen said in a loud voice.

"What is?" said the police operative holding her.

“The way people breed up multiple kids. Sure, they do all the hard work of the first five years, but then get to drop them off here and go home for another try. I’m curious. What’s in it for you? Apart from the job. What do you do with them? Little slaves in your bunk houses?”

One of the police laughed shortly. He chinned upward.

That meant something to Hen obviously. “You send them into *space*?” She was being extra disbelieving. “That has got to be the limit.” She gestured disgust with her upturned hands.

The police lost their patience and said some hard words.

Right by my side, a little person rose from the ground and pushed at me.

I looked down. Du. Tear-stained and grubby. I made a *shhh* mouth at her.

She nodded.

I gripped her hand and guided her into a slow, silent, slip-sliding movement back toward the second corner exit.

Ignoring the arguments at the elevator hub—the discussion had escalated into shouting and even screaming—Du and I slipped into the tunnel-mouth. There was just enough light to see by. The walls were dark grey, sprayed with concrete. But ha ha, around a sharp corner they were dark red plush.

Velvet? Du and I both gravitated to the wall for a feel.

“Nice, isn’t it?” Jackie said from behind. “That’s a movie theatre through there. Obviously not for the likes of us. You found her.” She sounded grudging. “Hen said you would.” Then she said side-mouthed into her ear piece, “I’ve got them.” She stared at me like she was daring me to run past her.

Back out there to be caught? As if I would. I tugged Du with me and made for the dark doorway of the movie theatre.

“Don’t go in there?!” Jackie hissed. Telling us, but begging too.

“Kosi is right,” came Hen’s voice. “It’s the very best of darks. Jackie, you go back out and help muddy the water. We’ll meet you back at the Fetcher House.”

Jackie shot me a glance of pure fury before she melted into the park behind us.

“Du, nice to meet you,” Hen said. “May I pick you up? We’ll need to pretend you’re feeling sick. Can you do that?”

Du looked doubtful.

“Kosi,” Hen said. “Can you pretend to be a nine-year-old again and hang onto me for dear

life?"

I clutched onto Hen's belt so she'd have both her hands free for Du.

Du nodded, now with her arms ready.

Hen picked her up and settled her on her hip, holding her protectively. She murmured. "Now girls, the biggest act of our lives. Du, look like you're going to vomit. Kosi, look like you're pale and frazzled."

Hen dragged me with her into the dark. There were little lights at floor level and a big hullabaloo at the left side of the huge space we stepped into and starting almost-running.

All I could do was skip and jump and half-trip over all the feet we went past. Startled curses followed us as we ran up a slight slope with little lights glowing along its sides. I half-saw legs and laps and shadowed torsos and arms.

I didn't look up just watched my feet. Ran. It wasn't far, but far enough. Out through another dark tunnel mouth and into the light. I wanted to stop and take in the sights but Hen ran on dragging me with her. "Sick child," she said. "About to vomit." People scattered left and right, giving us a clear run to the doors out. I saw a grandiose red carpet underfoot. Then we were outside. "Not safe yet, girls," Hen said. "I see one!"

Five long steps to the corner of the plaza, through the door there—which said *Fire Escape*—where Hen whirled me out of its way as it shut smartly.

She set Du on her feet. "Well done, girls. Now we go down all these stairs."